

## Spirited debate on education

**By Amy Starnes**  
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School officials and parents pulled folding chairs side by side Monday night to discuss topics such as discipline, textbook selection and cultural programs in Stockton schools at a citywide Racial Harmony and Fairness Forum. Rev. Bob Hailey of Unity Southern Baptist Church urged representatives of the four school districts that serve Stockton to ensure the textbooks selected for classes include accurate historical depictions.

"We've got to tell the true history, ... telling the faults and the good things. But we've got to tell both of the sides," he said.

Sylvia Ulmer, principal at Stockton Unified School District's Taft Elementary, said she personally witnessed and grew up with the problems Hailey pointed out.

"For the longest time as a child coming into this country, I felt that division. By going into education, I felt that I was helping. ... The books, they're not perfect, but they are getting so much better," Ulmer said. "We are beginning to see a tremendous change."

Monday's forum before the 26-member Racial Harmony and Fairness Task Force was a follow-up to a previous meeting on education where the school districts were strongly criticized by residents. The racial harmony forums began in 2001 when Mayor Gary Podesto created the task force and expressed a desire to analyze and improve race relations in Stockton.

About 100 people attended Monday's forum; Stockton Unified officials estimated about 40 were SUSD staff members. The forum was separated into breakout sessions on the topics of discipline, personnel issues, textbook selection and student success, culture and language programs that were designed for the administrators and parents to share ideas and concerns.

A few of the discussions became heated, and one degenerated into a rolling, near-shouting argument as parents attacked the officials on specific problems.

Podesto said arguments among the participants weren't necessarily counterproductive.

"They've got to argue back and forth. That's how we know there are issues," he said.

Not part of the arguments, Charlesa White told officials how she felt her son was badgered by an SUSD police officer into signing a statement that he took a sip of alcohol with other children when he maintains he did not.

"My son didn't drink. He was afraid of the officer," White said, adding that even though her son was ultimately not suspended, he's now scared when he sees SUSD officers and thinks it will happen again.

Jose Valles, SUSD's administrator for child welfare and attendance, took White aside to get more information to investigate her case.

Mamie Darlington, vice president and chairwoman of the education committee for Stockton's chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, told officials that there is a big difference between their policies and what is practiced in the schools.

"We've got a serious attitude problem with many of the district personnel who talk down to parents, talk down to people. A lot of what you're saying does not happen with regard to policy, rules and regulations," Darlington said.

Parent Shalise Graves of Stockton, attending a breakout discussion on discipline, said she learned a lot at the forum.

"This is good for me. ... I am learning things about the process and the things I must go through as a parent to help my child," Graves said.

Monday night's forum was the last for the summer. Several forums were held on race and culture as it relates to education, law enforcement, government, religion and other topics. Podesto said the task-force members will take the summer to examine the information they have gathered, ponder whether more forums are needed and begin to make recommendations of how Stockton could improve.

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